

Developer wants Waterside to be more than a nightlife hub. How about "the living room" of Norfolk?

By Elisha Sauers
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Courtesy of the city of Norfolk
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NORFOLK

The Baltimore-based developer that once envisioned downtown's Waterside as a nightlife hub has retooled with a decidedly more laid-back approach. And a plan to build luxury apartments in a later phase has apparently been abandoned.

New marketing materials from The Cordish Cos. rebrand the downtown site on the Elizabeth River as “the living room of Norfolk.”

“There’s 30,000 square feet in the center of the building, and they call it the living room of the city,” said Rick Henn, a local consultant who is working with the developer. “They want people to gather there.”

At a Virginia Restaurant, Lodging and Travel Association meeting Tuesday, Henn filled in to deliver a presentation on the project to a handful of hospitality industry professionals. Zed Smith, Cordish’s chief operating officer, had been scheduled to speak but was in Houston, where the developer is working on another business deal.

From a second-floor small-business incubator – a proposal the city later refuted – to a restaurant with mechanical bull rides, Cordish is pulling together a multifaceted plan. The proposal continues to be tweaked: In a memo to the City Council on Tuesday night, city staff said the developer’s earlier idea [to build a residential high-rise where the annex stood](#) won’t happen.

The company has committed to a \$40 million overhaul of the Norfolk property, restoring the site as a family-friendly draw.

Several new details emerged Tuesday, including a plan for Guy Fieri, a Food Network celebrity chef, to attend the grand opening in spring 2017 to introduce his new restaurant.

Henn, who used to help run Waterside for the city, has assisted the developer with recruiting some of the small and local tenants for the project, including Carolina Cupcakery, Cogan’s Pizza and The Fudgery, one of the original tenants in 1983.

Though Henn hesitated to discuss any specific dates attached to the project, other attendees at the meeting said they’ve been preparing for doors to open April 20.

Within Waterside District, the developer wants to offer several eating, drinking and entertainment experiences, each centered on a concept. There’s the “brew house,” anchored with the previously announced tenant Starr Hill Brewery, and “the barbecue venue,” a.k.a. Guy Fieri’s Smokehouse.

Then, there’s “the tavern,” “the pub,” “the music room” and “the beer garden.” The front of the building has been conceived as “the picnic area,” which could include fire pits. Henn said the outdoor component facing Waterside Drive is a key strategy.

“That’s what you need,” he said. “You need to show activity to bring people in.” Facing the water, the developer is working on “the yard,” where customers could play cornhole and other activities that may complement outdoor festivals.

“The market,” the large, 30,000-square-foot central area Cordish has dubbed the living room, will offer big-screen TVs for customers to watch sporting events, in addition to several small, permanent vendor stalls. Construction crews are gutting concrete inside the building to enlarge the space and will add skylights. Upstairs, Henn said, Cordish has wanted to open Spark, a business incubator for startup companies. It’s a concept the developer launched at its Power Plant Live project in Baltimore this January.

Such ventures are usually intended to be collaborative workspaces. Bryan Stephens, president and CEO of the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, said he has talked with Cordish to ensure Spark works with the region’s existing incubators.

However, Tuesday evening, after this story was published on PilotOnline.com, city spokeswoman Lori Crouch emailed a reporter to say the City Council received a memo from staff that day stating the incubator wasn’t happening. According to the memo, which The Pilot obtained Tuesday evening during the council meeting, city staff said “there is no intention from Cordish to proceed” with a residential tower either; should the developer want to build anything else on the site, it would trigger renegotiations subject to an approval process, including a council vote.

“Any materials prepared previously that contained either (the residential tower or business incubator) were for discussion purposes only and for the sole purpose to advance discussion with Cordish on their desire to invest further in Norfolk,” according to the memo.

Cordish spokeswoman Cari Furman said the developer believes both ideas would be “ideal” for the project. But in a statement emailed Tuesday night, she didn’t elaborate on why city staff said the company wouldn’t pursue them. “These two components would represent an additional \$100 million dollar investment into downtown Norfolk and would help further the revitalization of downtown Norfolk,” Furman said in the statement. “An expansion of the Waterside District of this magnitude obviously requires the approval and partnership of the City.”

Councilwoman Andria McClellan said she was glad to hear Cordish isn’t trying to do either concept.

The point of the city leasing out Waterside for free was to draw more entertainment and dining downtown, she said. Waterfront office space might be a good idea, she added – but the city should not be giving someone rent-free property for it.

Incubator aside, there are other ideas for the second floor. The developer wants to create a “beach club,” said Henn – a bar to overlook the water. Though Cordish intentionally releases information on tenants slowly as a marketing strategy, Henn said Waterside District is “90 to 95 percent leased.” One business that might have escaped a formal announcement is PBR, a cowboy-style bar with mechanical bull rides. Cordish’s Power Plant development in Hampton also has one.

While Norfolk residents await more tenant announcements, one they won’t hear is the return of Joe’s Crab Shack.

Though Cordish considered including the seafood chain – a previous Waterside tenant and a restaurant it features in some of its other developments – Henn said it’s no longer being considered for Waterside District.

Pilot writer Eric Hartley contributed to this report.

p:Contributed line

Elisha Sauers,p:Tagline

757-222-3864, elisha.sauers@pilotonline.com Follow @elishasauers on Twitter.